FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT’S
UNITY TEMPLE
A GOOD TIME PLACE

PATRICK F. CANNON

photographs by JAMES CAULFIELD
While Unity Temple today is essentially the same building that Frank Lloyd Wright designed, several changes have been made, prompted either by necessary restorations or by efforts to make it more functional for the congregation.

The first change came almost immediately, after serious problems developed with Wright’s original ventilation system, which used fans to circulate heat from steam-fed coils through the floors to ducts in the columns and piers. This led the congregation to install a steam system with radiators, visible in several of the photographs that follow. In 1961, the building exterior was resurfaced with materials that created a uniform surface instead of one that reflected daily concrete pour lines and form markings from the original construction. At the same time, the balconies in Unity House were partitioned to create closed classrooms.

Yet another resurfacing was undertaken in 1973–1974 to return the surface to a finish that more closely resembles the original, but still without the pour lines and other markings. A mix of concrete and pea gravel was sprayed on the surfaces. When dry, it was lightly sandblasted to expose the aggregate.

By 1984, both Unity House and the auditorium had been repainted in the original colors, although not with the original techniques and finishes. Grayish yellow, yellow-green, and medium brown are the base colors used in Unity House, accented by dark brown, yellow-brown, and lime green. In the auditorium, surfaces like the baseboards and column bases were left unpainted, with other surfaces painted in pale yellow, pale green, and yellow-gray. To heighten the effect of entering the main spaces, the foyer is painted in a muted palette of gray and yellow.
This view from the north lower balcony shows two of the four main supporting columns. Wright spent a great deal of time working out the trim scheme. While certainly rectilinear, it seems more dynamic than rigid. Note how the column trim leaves the edges exposed. Two sets of stairs flank the podium, leading down to the exit doors and up to the podium and organ console.

The east terrace, with Unity House at the left. Three pairs of doors on each side provide easy access to, and exit from, the building. The slogan above the door neatly expresses the philosophy of Unitarianism as it was then: “For the Worship of God and the Service of Man.”
A view from the upper balcony looking toward the north and northwest.

The north clerestory, with the exterior columns visible.
Unity Temple of Oak Park, Illinois, was considered a modern masterwork from the moment it was completed in 1908. Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) sought to produce a structure as dynamic as the congregation that would occupy it, finding inspiration in the liberal nature of Unitarian thought when creating the groundbreaking design. Wright’s use of reinforced concrete was revolutionary for the time, making Unity Temple the first concrete monolith in the world. Inside, warm, inviting hues complement the red oak trim, and skylights and high clerestory art-glass windows fill the space with natural light. The building, which continues to serve its original purpose as a meeting-house for worshipers, is also admired for its superb acoustics. Wright was extremely proud of his design and wrote extensively about it in his autobiography.

*Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple: A Good Time Place* provides an intimate tour of one of Wright’s most beloved buildings. Architectural historian Patrick F. Cannon discusses the history of Unity Temple, from Wright’s design proposals to its value today as a National Historic Landmark. More than forty-five artful color photographs by James Caulfield, along with historical photographs and floorplans, are featured, accompanied by Cannon’s descriptive captions. This book celebrates the ingenuity of a master architect whose vision is evident in every element of Unity Temple.

**PATRICK F. CANNON** has had a long career as a publicist, journalist, and editor. He is the author of *Prairie Metropolis: Chicago and the Birth of a New American Home* and *Hometown Architect: The Complete Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park and River Forest, Illinois*, both published by Pomegranate.

**JAMES CAULFIELD** has been a commercial and advertising photographer for over twenty-five years. His studio is a state-of-the-art natural-light production facility in downtown Chicago. His work is also featured in the books *Prairie Metropolis* and *Hometown Architect.*